

MUSLIMS CELEBRATE SCRIPTURE DURING RAMADAN

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It was a special day for a 4-year-old boy. Relatives and friends had gathered in the small house on the dusty street of a south Indian city. I was to be initiated into reading the holy Quran. Even now, at 58, I vividly remember the gifts and the specially ordered, new sherwani (long coat) of brocade I wore. I can still smell the kebabs and freshly baked nan bread the cooks were preparing for my Bismillah ceremony.

Because my mother lived with us and taught all three of my own children to read the Quran, the tradition survived even here, in the mountains of Southern West Virginia. I hope to pass along this gift to my 3-year-old grandson and his 6-month-old sister.

In most Muslim communities throughout the world, similar ceremonies are performed for children around the age of 4 or 5, to initiate them into reading and reciting the Quran. Then, around the age of 10, there is another special celebration for completing the reading. Some of these boys and girls are not only able to read the Quran, but they memorize the whole scripture, which consists of more than 6,300 verses. Such children are given the title of hafiz, meaning those who preserve and protect the Quran. Apart from fasting during the day and feasting in the evening, Muslims in most communities observe the month of Ramadan by performing congregational prayers behind a hafiz, who completely recites the entire Quran within the month.

Muslims believe that the Quran was revealed to prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). The first revelations came to him during the month of Ramadan while he was meditating in a cave near Mecca in the year 610 C.E. Throughout his prophetic mission of 23 years, he received revelations from God. These revelations were immediately memorized and recorded in writing by his companions. The written material was mostly on leather, animal parchment and bones. By the time of his death, hundreds of the Prophet's companions had memorized the Quran. The tradition of memorization continues until this day. There are hundreds of hafiz even here, in the United States.

The verses from the Quran help us understand the origins of humankind, and the beauty in its diversity. Some reflect on the position of human beings in the universe and their relationship to their creator. The Quran is a guide for leading a life of purity, so that we return to the source in a pristine state.

Hindi is a writer and member of West Virginia's Islamic community.